

## Introduction

*See with an open nose,  
Hear with an open mind,  
Feel with an open heart.*

-- Darwin Renz

### Arf we go

*Lehigh Acres, FL (Oct. 2009)* I had barely opened the door to my pick-up when Darwin leaped into the driver's seat, wagging his tail like a run-away windshield wiper and knocking a half cup of stale coffee all over the dashboard.

He quickly jumped to the passenger's side as I slid behind the wheel and reached to pull my safety belt over my shoulder.

A daily ritual was underway.

First, the wet, slobbery kiss in my right ear before I could snap the belt into place. Then a wet one on my nose and in my eye. Once settled, I turned and stared into his eyes. His return look said it all: "Thank you for bringing me along, Mr. Mark! Where to this time?"

"Well, Sir Darwin," I said excitedly, "We're off to the rugged mountains of North Carolina, to watch green leaves erupt into all the vivid colors of a rainbow!"



"Yes!" replied his tail, followed by another wet one in my ear.

I knew that to some degree, Darwin, my nearly one year-old blue healer, was color blind. Dogs see in two hues: the violet and blue-violet range, which appear to them as blue, and the greenish-yellow, yellow, and red range, which we humans see as yellow. We also see best in bright light while Darwin, with his predatory genes, sees about 10 times better than us in low light.

Darwin probably didn't care what color the leaves would be anyway. And he didn't care where we were going just so we were going. He did prefer it be fun. Fun for him are wild scents, sights and sounds to process and a chance to play frisbee at least once a day.

As one who is less sophisticated than my dog, I do care where I go, although having fun is my priority as well. I live in SW Florida, where the weather is warm year-round, with the exception of January and February when the temperatures can dip into the low to mid 30s.

Our summers are particularly muggy. So when the first cooler breezes of late September blow in from the North, I start craving cooler weather the way a Snowbird craves the heat on a wintry day. I am also lured by natural colors in the natural world. Green may be my favorite wild color, but alone it becomes tiring. My therapy comes from taking a 1500 mile round-trip to the mountains of western North Carolina to witness the annual turning of the leaves.

Two autumns ago, I made the trek in late October. To escape the crowds of fellow leaf peepers, a friend and I hiked the creeks where we rarely encountered other people. The photos in this book are from that trip as well as the one Darwin and I were now taking.

The changing leaves alone were enough to inspire me to start packing. Yet there were other reasons I had to go. If Fall was a beautiful time of year in the Carolina mountains, why couldn't my approach to 55 and entering the early Fall of my life also be beautiful? I hoped that by embracing the changing season, I could also embrace the inevitable physical and mental changes that happen in each of us as we age.

I know what you're thinking. What about Marisa? Why don't you bring her along too? Some of you who know me still haven't met my adorable wife. You have hinted that either she is a ghost or I keep her locked in the house, sweeping fossil sharks teeth off the floor or ironing my dive suit for my fossil hunting trips. Hmm...that's not a bad idea. But she'd never go for it. We do a lot of fun things together but there are some things she doesn't mind if I do on my own. This was one of them. I had to go alone, with Darwin. This was a trip for an old boy and his young dog. Marisa understood and was completely supportive, as only a ghost can be.



"Yodel A Hee Hoo! Yodel A Hee Haw! Yodel..."



"You're tone deaf Mr. Mark!"